

RE-READING “THE POETICS OF AUGMENTED SPACE”
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The Poetics of Augmented Space: Learning from Prada

Lev Manovich

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1. Text Summary and Analysis

The *Poetics of Augmented Space* was originally written in 2002, and revised for publication in 2005. It is interesting to note the differences between the original text and the updated version. The most noticeable difference is the addition of an introduction—what was once a somewhat disjointed investigation into the implications of augmented space, here Lev Manovich begins with a set of provocations and a definition of terms. He opens with a question: "How is our experience of a spatial form affected when the form is filled in with dynamic and rich multimedia information?" The introduction also includes a definition for "augmented space:" "augmented space is the physical space overlaid with dynamically changing information." A witness to the contemporary phenomena of media-saturated urban environments and the proliferation of small, portable computational devices, Manovich is interested in their effect on human perception and experience. How do we process these spaces? Is the underlying form secondary to the information being presented upon it? Do we intuitively combine the static spatial elements with the dynamic media layer into a perceptual gestalt or do they remain separate? Intriguingly, few changes were made to account for technological developments for the new text (I counted only one—the substitution of "HD" for "DV"). Ultimately, this is not a piece on specific technologies but rather on phenomenology. Manovich is concerned with the effects these digitally enhanced spaces have on the human condition. Al-

though he argues that augmented space is a new paradigm with its own logics and implications, he places it within the larger historical context of ornamentation and augmentation of the human built environment. Therefore, as technology has advanced over the last decade, Manovich's astute observations remain as relevant as when they were written, if not more so.

What follows is a brief history of virtual space and augmented space, along with their key differences and implications. The critical distinction between virtual space and augmented space is that the former constructs an artificial spatial experience unrelated to its immediate environment whereas the latter layers digital information over a "real" space. Qualifying the 1990s as a decade focused on the virtual, he suggests that the 2000s will be a decade all about the physical, albeit a sort of digitally-mediated physical. Manovich discusses the contemporary technological conditions that have made augmented space possible and even commonplace: video surveillance, cellphone technologies (which he sets in opposition to surveillance, in that it delivers data to users rather than monitoring them), and digital displays (which take the invisible information of cellphone and makes it visible). All technology simultaneously augments and restrains—he places surveillance and augmentation in a "symbiotic relationship," where tracking users can be both an improvement of experience and a form of control. Under a new section heading titled "Panopticon and Information Theory," Manovich continues to list the major fields of space-augmentation research:

ubiquitous computing, augmented reality, tangible interfaces, wearable computers, intelligent buildings, intelligent spaces, context-aware computing, ambient intelligence, smart objects, wireless location services, sensor networks, and e-ink. He crafts an argument around these technologies as extending the model of the panopticon beyond geometry and visual sight lines to encompass data transfer, replacing the binary seen/not seen with a gradient of variable bandwidth. Manovich discusses the importance of scale in this context—our perception of “immersion” is subject to the scale of the technology relative to our bodies. In this sense, it is linked to spatial design practices already well understood by architects.

Manovich ultimately presents two exemplary pieces for consideration: Janet Cardiff’s audio walks and Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum. Relatively low-tech, Cardiff’s walks are simply a pre-recorded audio track related to a narrative in a specific place, typically outdoors. The information contained on the recording relates to and augments the perception of the space the user inhabits. While only using simple technology, these fixed audio recordings are also implicitly dynamic when used—the time of day, season of the year, mood of the user, shifting ambient sounds, and other aleatoric phenomena create a unique but serialized experience of space permeated with information. The example of the Jewish Museum in Berlin is for me less convincing. Ostensibly, the jagged geometry and angular strip windows represent a mapping of displaced Jewish citizens onto the build-

ing. However, this information is not at all legible or necessarily discernible. Whether this information needs to be legible is open to debate, but I felt that the inclusion of this example weakened Manovich’s argument for the augmentation of space. In a sense, earlier precedents like the painted caves at Chauvet, *trompe l’oeil* in Renaissance frescoes, or the allegorical reliefs adorning the entrances to Gothic cathedrals would all represent forms of information mapped onto surfaces, often to illusory effect.

Manovich proceeds to discuss the white cube (the gallery) vs. the black box (the cinema) as zones of experimentation around the concept of augmented space. He initially sets up a dichotomy between the two by describing the white box as dynamic, allowing for more radical experimentation and iteration, with artists pushing beyond the confines of the framed piece to sculpture and ultimately whole room installations, and the black box as more static, because the form of cinema is dependent on fixed technologies like the projector. This characterization of the trajectory of 20th century art is vastly oversimplified, and seems to purposefully ignore major developments like the refusal of the gallery in the land art movement, but it is a worthwhile discussion to have as a vector into understanding the position of augmented space in a historical context. He ultimately breaks down the dualism of this argument and mentions examples in experimental film that speak to issues of augmentation of space.

After incorporating some of Venturi’s ideas about architecture as a communicative medium and offering

more examples of spatial augmentation, including Diller Scofidio's Facsimile and Jump Cuts projects, Nox's Freshwater Pavillion, and a particularly compelling project for the Plaza Zocalo in Mexico City by Raffael Lozano-Hemmer, Manovich ends the piece with a discussion of the Prada store in New York. The store features several digitally enhanced spaces, which were designed by Reed Kram. Manovich cites this project as one to "learn from" primarily because it creates a narrative around itself that is poetic and not simply functional. It creates new modes of seeing, both in the electronically-enhanced mirrors, which allow a visitor to see themselves as they were a few seconds before and in the unabashed openness of the Prada atlas, which unveils and demystifies the allure of the global fashion brand. In this sense, Manovich is interested in deeply human questions about the appropriate roles these technologies should play in the augmentation of our environments.

2. Questions and Challenges

While in many ways the notion of augmented space—of embedding information systems in our environment—is the continuation of a deeper lineage of human aesthetic experience. However, the proliferation of digitally augmented space is in its infancy and as a new technology, it is encumbered by what preceded it. At first, the automobile could not be thought of as being radically different than the carriage that preceded it, and its naming—the "horseless carriage"—reflects the limited understanding of its potential. I would argue that we are in the "horseless carriage" stage of digitally augmented space. Can we imagine more radically conjectural scenarios for the future applications of this technology?

To some degree, our inability to conceptualize the future is a function of language—we have a limited set of vocabulary to classify and describe the existing conditions of our environment and struggle to craft a future that is not beholden to the present. When we speak, for example, of augmented space as the "layering" of digital information in physical space, we restrict our sense of what that could be to what is implied by the metaphor of layering. Can we consider a new set of terms for the discussion of these phenomena, or is our vision of the future always limited to the very near future? Can we develop a new linguistic framework for the fusion of information and our environment?